Cambridge Core

A guide to writing an effective abstract / selecting keywords for discovery

The title, abstract, and keywords you select for your manuscript play an important part in the discovery of your article after publication. Since many researchers rely on search engines such as Google to find content relevant to their field, the careful selection of keywords in all of these can have a large impact on the life of an article, extending from readership through citation.
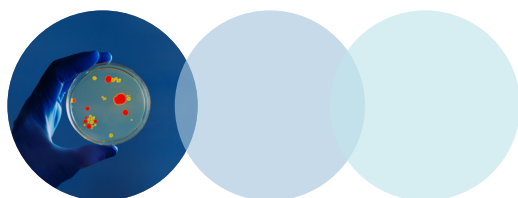
Keywords

When choosing keywords, aim to avoid broad terms such as "philosophy" or "philology" and instead try to target specific methodologies, authors, or sub disciplines that are of specific focus for your article. Many disciplines have specific keyword lists that may be helpful to reference when selecting your own as these are currently in wide use and many researchers will utilize them in their searches. Unless the author guidelines for your journal recommend otherwise, we suggest selecting 3-5 keywords to include in the body of your manuscript, which will then be tagged to your article upon its publication. A guide to Search Engine Optimization for books and journal articles can be found here.

Abstract

An effective abstract comprises one or two paragraphs (or another length specified in the journal's Instructions for Contributors) from which the reader can learn the fundamental points of the paper without needing to refer to any additional links or text. A good abstract will contain many if not all of the keywords associated with the paper, and aim to communicate your research in more readily accessible language. For this reason, ideally, you should write your abstract so that it is comprehensible to as wide an audience as possible. You can do this by limiting the amount of technical language that you use and explaining any such language that you do employ. Do not hide the most exciting elements of your paper, get right to them.

It is important to note that though abstracts developed as a summarization tool, they now play a vital role in the effective cataloguing of research in many online databases, such as Google, PubMed, Academic Search Premier, Thomson Reuters Web of Science, EBSCO Host, and countless others. These databases, accessible to scholars all over the world who may not have access to the journal your paper is published in, allow your work to be more easily discovered, read, used and cited by scholars who might not otherwise come into contact with your work.

Individual journals may offer specific guidance on writing abstracts and is worth consulting the journal's Instructions for Contributors.

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